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ABSTRACT

This chapter consists of a conversation between a third-grade teacher and a teacher educator about the advantages of the portfolio method of assessment. The advantages of portfolios are that they are a powerful learning tool as well as an assessment tool, they can make the separate subjects in a curriculum come together in an integrated way, and the fact that they are prepared for an audience besides the teacher makes the student think more about the real-world applicability of the material. The challenges of portfolios are the time they require, and that educators need to relinquish some control in order to empower students at the center of the learning process. Working with portfolios requires engaging students in the process of developing standards, collecting and selecting from their authentic work, and making presentations to an audience. This collaborative process encourages both teachers and students to explore new concepts for standards of quality. The exercise of determining these standards is a valuable learning tool in itself. Beyond content knowledge, portfolios encourage critical thinking, decision making, organization, reflection, and presentation, which are practical life skills. Portfolios encourage authentic interdisciplinary links that cut across content areas, providing support for teacher collegiality, teaming, and integrated studies. For students, this helps break down artificial barriers that can separate subjects when the focus is almost entirely on content acquisition rather than application and use. (Contains 10 references.) (TD)

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Chapter 7

AT THE HEART OF EDUCATION: PORTFOLIOS AS A LEARNING TOOL

Rick Gordon and Thomas Julius

This chapter takes the form of a conversation between a Grade 3 teacher and a teacher educator. Rick Gordon, who speaks first, has a BA from Stanford University, an MA from the University of Minnesota, and is completing a PhD at the University of Colorado. He is a world traveler, especially leading youth groups in Asian and European adventures. Tom Julius, who has the last word, gained his BA from Tufts University and his MEd from Antioch New England Graduate School. Tom has worked as an educator for more than fourteen years, nine of those spent learning from third graders in Keene, New Hampshire.

This chapter is important because the central value of portfolios in assessment is shown to be applicable across a large grade range. The characteristics of a tool with such universal application shed light on how the curriculum is experienced and reveal connections to other powerful experiential methods, such as those described in the chapters by Gail Simmons and Rena Upitis. The chapter retains the give and take of a conversation, but it has been rewritten to eliminate aspects of speech which do not read well, and to insert literature references, which hardly anyone that we know uses in even the most professional of dialogues.

Introduction

For many educators calling themselves "experiential," "progressive," or "student-centered," there is long-held tension in their practice. The direction for their teaching is clear—to actively engage students at the center of the learning process. Unfortunately, assessing the results of this learning has proven more problematic. Examinations fail to adequately capture the learning we seek for our students; nor are they consistent with the learning processes we value. In striving to touch hearts and minds while contributing to intellectual and emotional growth, richer and more personal forms of assessment are needed.

Confronting this dilemma, we have discovered that portfolios offer a profound solution to our needs. Whether with elementary students or college-level, pre-service teachers, portfolios touch the heart of education—inspiring students to demonstrate their growth while contributing to their continued learning. Rather than causing a break with other educational experiences, portfolios have become central to the learning process for our students, serving as a powerful tool to engage people of diverse ages, as we relate in this discussion of our work in two very different settings.

Coming from opposite ends of the educational spectrum, we thought it would be valuable to explore the issues of portfolios together—engaging in a conversation regarding their advantages and challenges, and where they fit into the learning process for our students. Through this discussion, we came to new understandings and insights into our own thinking. We hope these reflections will inspire fresh insights for other teachers and encourage similar conversations with teachers across grades and subjects.

Rick: As a teacher of pre-service teachers, I have used portfolios in lieu of a final exam in an effort to have students comprehensively reflect on, and synthesize, their learning in my courses. Counting as half their grade, the portfolio and its half-hour presentation to several classmates and me, is a serious undertaking. While students are expected to include selections from required work in class, such as research and reflection papers, the breadth of other materials which constitute their portfolio grows ever more

interesting as the personal nature of each student's way of knowing shines through. Adding personal mementos like knitting projects, poetry, or rosary beads, my students have constructed meaning for themselves as teachers-to-be, relating experiences from our course to experiences in their lives to create their understandings which are simultaneously a touchstone and a jumping-off point for further growth (Gordon, 1994).

Tom: Like many educators, I have struggled to reconcile my knowledge of the complexity of child development with the bureaucratic, institutional imperatives of modern public schools. At the Jonathan M. Daniels Elementary School in Keene, New Hampshire, we have instituted an alternative to letter-graded report cards and conventional parent-teacher conferences that traditionally begin at third grade in our school district. Our reporting process includes two family conferences, in which students present their portfolios to their family and teacher, and two report cards, each consisting of a narrative and a skills checklist.

When we piloted this alternative evaluation system, we were looking for methods that would dispel the need to quantify, categorize, and distill a student's school experience to fit on a three-inch-square, self-adhesive record card, affixed on a file folder and forgotten. We wanted to release teachers, students, and families from the constraint of measuring a student's learning solely through the testing of rehearsed performances. We wanted to develop alternatives to letter-graded report cards. We discovered that what we were really engaged in was creating a culture of evaluation (Julius, 1993).

Advantages of Portfolios

Our conversation began by looking at why we chose to use portfolios. What we discovered was that portfolios were not just an assessment tool but, more importantly, were a powerful learning tool. Central to their value was the concept of authenticity—being "real," they were defined by quality standards not merely determined by the teacher, but inherent in facing a real audience with

personally meaningful work. This idea of audience helped us better understand what distinguishes portfolios from other forms of assessment and what makes them work effectively for students.

T: At the elementary level, kids are accustomed to school being parceled into subject areas. Portfolios can make the whole curriculum come together in an integrated way. The essential importance of portfolios is that they are created for an audience. When you're doing important work, it always has an audience. When you're doing work for a grade, the only audience is the teacher. With portfolios you have the potential for the audience to be much broader. It could be your peers in the classroom, your teacher, other kids in the school, your family, even the much larger community outside the school. I think there is a sense of importance to performance that isn't there when you're doing work just for yourself.

R: In a sense, you're saying that it's more authentic. Performance is more authentic than presenting a paper to your teacher, because in life you perform in front of others and, in doing that performance, the quality should increase.

T: For me, in order for a piece to be authentic, you need three things: a product, a performance of some kind, and reflection. Who your audience is going to be puts the parameters on what this piece is like. You have what you produce, who you're going to produce it for, and your reflection on it.

R: I'm trying to relate this to the college experience. I have somewhat different reasons for doing portfolios. My problem is that, by the time I get people in college, they know how to perform for an audience, a teacher particularly. I'm seeking to get them to think more about their own learning and motivation and how to be self-responsible, self-directed learners. I'm trying to get the students to switch from thinking of the audience as being their teacher to the audience being real life, either their peers or the outside community—to get away from performing for the teacher audience or some objective criteria out there and to think more about, "What am I really learning here in the real world sense?"

These concepts of audience and authenticity link the two different ages.

T: When you think about traditional portfolios being a big folder that artists carry around, you're talking about a portfolio as something that is useful not only for oneself but that also says who you are to an outside audience. I think that's true for elementary students as well as adult learners.

R: How does that relate to the rest of your teaching philosophy? Has it changed the way you teach or is it just assessment?

T: Portfolios really match the way I teach. I moved to portfolios because I was looking for some form of evaluation that was in concert with the way I was teaching. I would say that portfolios haven't changed the way I teach; they've made me look at what I'm already teaching in different ways. It makes me look for ways to reach different kinds of learners, so that the portfolios aren't just filled with paper-and-pencil tasks. Instead, there's a broad range of examples of learning within the portfolio.

R: That's been the greatest thing for college students, and this might be an advantage with their age, as their repertoire of skills is so much greater than most younger kids. With portfolios, I hoped they would include a representation of their work beyond simply assigned written work. That's been the most exciting thing for me. I was trying to address multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1991) and allow people with other strengths to bring them in. By college, what they know how to do is write papers or take multiple-choice tests. But I was surprised that some students brought in stuff that was so interesting. For example, one woman brought all these objects that had meaning to her. This tiny bag of beads from a self-defense course, a Dr. Seuss book, a drawing from a student she tutored. . . . Through all these objects, she explained how these experiences made her better understand her role as a teacher. Another guy brought in a computer and had done a hypercard kind of program that was very interactive. The point was that he wanted his teaching to be very interactive and this allowed us to be

involved. By college, too often we tend to confine people to the written word.

T: Was having their peers be their audience somewhat new for them?

R: I think so. For them, their peers were familiar. They had done a lot of work with them in class and they felt relatively safe. I think that allowed them to do more risky things some times, to be more personally exposed than they might be otherwise. The reason I included peers was that I felt that their fellow students learned from being there. It was the reinforcement of hearing someone else's learning and then you discussing your own. Rather than the final being that end-point of learning, where students think, "This is it, I finished, I can forget it," students leave the portfolio presentations either with some new insights or with reinforcement for what they were thinking.

T: What do you imagine them doing with it? Clearly they carried some learning with them beyond that. For instance, one of the things that I hope happens for my third graders is that they save the work. The portfolio goes home with them, and 20 years from now they're going to be able to look back, reflect on themselves and what they were learning back then, and think about who they are now. Do you see that happening at all?

R: I've heard people say they did portfolios as teacher ed. students and it's the only thing they kept. So I think maybe they do. I think this brings up a different issue. In the teacher training program I worked in, what I did was so different from the rest of the program. There was no agreement on how the department as a whole evaluated. If portfolios were to be used throughout the program, then I think students would build a record of their understanding of themselves as teachers and learners. They would then develop and take this with them and it could be central to their teaching. They might look at it and think, "Wow, I've come a long way. I may be having a tough time, but look where I was four or ten years ago." I think if we had final portfolios as the exit from the teacher ed. program, where

they brought in all their stuff, you might find some really powerful things. Likewise, I think it's a question for K-12 to look how portfolios fit across ages and subject areas.

Starting Out and the Implications for Practice

Beginning with portfolios requires both teachers and students to explore new concepts for standards of quality. Portfolio participants need to reflect on what constitutes quality work which, sadly, is too rarely considered in traditional educational settings. The exercise of determining these standards, often through a process of submitting work for review and comments, is a valuable learning tool in itself. Through this process, both teachers and students become more responsible for their learning and the outcomes they value.

T: When I started with portfolios several years ago, it was the first time that the students had ever been asked to reflect on their work in any kind of organized way. We had to teach them the language that they needed. When we asked them to select a piece of work, we had to teach them what "select" meant. We had to teach them from ground zero. Recently, we have the first and second grades in the entire school district using portfolios for evaluation as well as reporting. We're excited to be getting kids in the third grade who have experience and practice with the language of portfolios. Now they have an image in their mind of what a portfolio is. It's a huge advantage for us.

R: It's funny that you said starting at ground zero, because I felt like that with college students. Sometimes I think it's worse with college students because they're so entrenched in not being asked to make choices. When I ask what standards we should use to evaluate, they don't want to deal with it. They have been so immune to having to consider that question over the last 18 years that they don't even want to discuss it. It would be interesting to see your kids in college.

I think that's what schools should be about—the refinement of people's sense of quality. They learn that quality is

something that we strive toward and that they themselves determine the standards of quality to a large degree. And that's the standard to which they should be held. That's where integrity comes in—that you live up to your standards. Not the traditional structure where students more and more must accept outside imposition rather than expanding their abilities to be decision makers and choosers in life.

T: I think portfolios really assist students in producing and recognizing what William Glasser (1990) calls quality work. One of the reasons is that portfolios lend themselves to sharing one's work with others. Having a sense of producing quality work is one of the things that we try to get across to kids, as well as learning the essential skills that they need for third grade, practising self-evaluation and becoming reflective learners. It sounds like that's pretty similar to the college level.

R: Of course, the primary goals are for people to develop skills and content knowledge—I think that's ostensibly still the role of schools—but also, what Dewey (1938) calls collateral learning in terms of collaboration and sharing. Students learn that not only is it okay to share with your peers, but that's where quality develops. Individually, you're probably going to produce weaker work than you will with others. Another lesson is that it's okay for kids to produce work that's very different from others: to learn that quality is something that runs across different styles and that it might look very different for this ESL kid, this visual learner. They're each going to present different pictures perhaps, but they can all be strong in their own way.

T: Collateral learning brings up the question of how to establish common standards for the group at the same time that you are enabling opportunities for individuality. Portfolios are a beautiful vehicle for that. You may have the teacher setting criteria for particular tasks, but the students, via their portfolios, present the way they approach the tasks as individuals. The standard remains the same. I have started to experiment presenting models from which students can generate standards—projects from last year, examples of

pieces of writing that we talk about in terms of quality. From those models we create some standards as to what writing would need to have in order to be a good piece of writing. The standards become a collaborative effort.

This also gets back to the question of audience. Our primary audience is reporting to families, so we never say to the children, "Select your best piece"; we say, "Select a piece of work that you want to present, something that is meaningful to you." Inevitably, they select work that shows the range and depth of their abilities. One of the things parents worry about is, "If all I ever see is my kid's best work, how do I know what they need to improve on?"

R: Portfolios don't lend themselves to sorting, which I see as a benefit. I see the role of schools to help all students succeed to the greatest degree they can. When I think of portfolios, it's as a teaching and learning tool, not as an assessment tool. When I used a final exam, I thought that I was establishing a floor beneath which these kids couldn't sink. I had a final exam to assure a minimum level of understanding. I found that with portfolios, when I said to students, "Figure out what you want to include," the floor was never the problem. I realized that my final exam was both the ceiling and the floor at the same time. No one could come up with things outside the final exam. They could answer the questions, but they couldn't bring in these things from their outside class experiences. They didn't fit. I realized that we create these parameters that confine students more often than not. When we take away the parameters, students can excel far beyond what we often think they can do.

T: As an educator, I'm much more interested in learning than I am in teaching. Unfortunately, that's not always true with people in education.

R: I would agree; schools should be about learning. That's why we like portfolios—they are a learning tool and they happen to work well with assessment. But their fundamental purpose, like that of schools, is learning. Instead of wasting time preparing for and taking final exams, I felt like students were actually doing more learning. Especially in

college where you only have 20 classes with a group of students. I hate to waste 10% of my classes on grading people. I'd rather spend 100% on student learning.

T: When you have letter-grades, people stop looking at the actual piece of work and start looking at the grade. Eliminating the grades has forced our audience, our families, to pay much more attention to the work students are doing. We are very up front with parents. We tell them, "You will no longer be able to ask your children when they come home with their report card, 'Wadjaget?' This system of evaluation is going to require you to look at your daughters' and sons' work and talk to them about it in ways that some of you may not have done before."

R: In college, we must submit grades. Portfolios really improve the quality of students' work, so on one hand it wasn't a big issue, grading. Again, I'm trying to make the students succeed, not fail, and this allows them to show their strengths. I also enjoyed the process and the feedback from their peers, who very much try to be positive. The last comments I make to the students, in the context of grading the portfolios, are ones that can lead to further growth and not be just a final assessment. That gives me an opportunity to compliment their progress and push them to think about issues.

T: One of the things that's been striking for me, at family conferences where students present their portfolios, is that dads come much more frequently than when it's a parent-teacher conference. When is it that fathers usually come to school anyway? They come to sports events, a play . . . some kind of a performance. When students are presenting their portfolios, it's a performance; dads are more inclined to come because they have a role. There is a way for them to participate, as opposed to a conventional parent-teacher conference where a parent's role is not as well defined, or it may be to go in and defend the child against the savage educational system.

R: The performance idea reminds me of the question: "Why do kids get letter jackets for sports, and awards for concerts and plays, while academics don't get any rewards except

grades, and that's not the same?" I never intended to use portfolios as ways of individually recognizing students, but it certainly plays more into the concept of the way, socially, we look at what gets rewarded in society. Accomplishment and performances get rewarded. I think portfolios play into the way our society looks at rewarding people, in a way that makes it worthwhile.

T: And look at what behaviors portfolios are rewarding. They encourage critical thinking, decision making, organization, reflection, and presentation, as well as content knowledge. These are practical, necessary life skills for literate people.

Interestingly, I have found that students who are less skilled at conventional school behavior, like fill-in-the-blank tests, are some of the most adept portfolio presenters. The students who are very good at sitting quietly and parroting back the right answer often become flustered when asked to perform for a portfolio presentation.

R: I think the perception at the college level is that portfolio presentations are stressful, anxiety-ridden, unsettling—lots of negative feelings before them, and that's good. On the whole, this reflects that people are being challenged to think in ways they haven't been asked to before and that inspires them. What is stressful for them is to think about what they have learned and not just answer what the teacher is going to ask on a multiple-choice test. It's more in the heart than just in the head and that's hard on people. Afterward, they say the portfolio was the most effective part of the class, commenting, "I learned that I still need to process more," or, "It gave me things to think about afterwards. I realized how much I learned because I couldn't fit it all in." To me those are very positive things to be realizing.

T: That makes me think about kids having to go from the collecting process to the selecting process with their portfolios. That can be a very difficult point because some kids want to put it all in. Agonizing over choices indicates to me that they find value in doing portfolios. There's something about saying, "I've got all this stuff and this is the one piece I'm going to select and put out there for others to view." Something about that speaks much more to the heart.

R: Portfolios emphasize students as decision makers—throughout life, you need to make choices. This is part of the real life skills that kids say school doesn't address. This is one of those skills that is so inherent in life—making selections of quality and learning to live with those choices, and maybe change them and reflect. I think that lesson is something that is very valuable.

T: It doesn't matter who you are or how much you've achieved academically . . . those skills of decision making, self-evaluation, and reflection are the kinds of skills that are essential whether you're going to drop out in the tenth grade or go on for a doctorate.

Challenges of Portfolios: Rethinking Time and Control

Although their advantages are overwhelming, portfolios certainly provide challenges. The most common concern is the time they require, although in the context of student learning, we would argue this time is well spent. The other primary issue for some educators is the need to relinquish some of their control in order to empower students at the center of the learning process. For experiential educators, this is a natural fit. For more traditional teachers, this step is more difficult, but can potentially be a powerful impetus for rethinking one's relationship with students. Witnessing students' growth through portfolios has been the most gratifying experience in our work. Only when we make students free to demonstrate their learning are their, and our, accomplishments truly evident.

R: There's got to be some things about portfolios that are not great. Can you think of any? Time certainly is one for me; these do take up time. The process is valuable, so the time is well spent, but it does change the use of time in a course from strictly transmitting information to developing a group that can make decisions and construct meaning from issues. It's not like a test where I can say, "I'm giving an exam on Friday and I determine what's on it." Portfolios

take a lot of time with your class determining what should be included, how they're evaluated, what are standards of quality. These are valuable skills to learn, but they do take up time which may have been used for other things in the past.

T: That may be true at the college level, but for a long time in early childhood education, we have been focused on process as well as product. Portfolios match the way we teach in early childhood education. High school teachers who are more confined to a content area may feel that they lose time. However, I think that the time you lose from teaching content you gain back in students reflecting on their work. While they are selecting work for their portfolios, they are reflecting on the content of the course in a different way than when they were trying to produce it. I would argue you aren't losing any content.

R: I agree. Being in those presentations is a million times more gratifying to me than grading exams. To hear students discuss their learning makes me feel like I've contributed to something positive. That, to me, is a great benefit. With tests you never know. It could be a person just studies for the test and forgets it a minute later. Again, it comes back to the heart being in it. Hearing people speak from their heart means more than seeing what they write from their head.

T: One of the most moving experiences I've had as a teacher is watching my students present their portfolios at family conferences. Recently, one of my students presented her portfolio to a group of six adults: her biological mom and dad, her step-dad, myself, a student teacher, and our school's reading specialist. There we were, six adults, listening to the child, encouraging, helping the student to reflect on her work and set some personal goals. This is the kind of thing that rarely happens in schools, and that you never have the opportunity for in a regular class day.

R: Do you confront this issue of giving up control—trusting kids to come up with standards—or do your parameters take care of that?

T: Since we don't ask students to select best work, we end up receiving work that comes from the heart as much as from the head, so students select work that is representative of their skills. This allows me to demonstrate, to the student as well as to the family, the student's skill level and ways in which he or she is improving. Everyone can look at it; it's a concrete example. It actually gives me more control in the sense that I'm looking for demonstrations of improvement in authentic work and not in a test that is abstracted from student's work.

R: This issue of losing control goes back to fitting assessment with your teaching philosophy. Part of my teaching philosophy is to give students more control over their own learning. I think for third graders as much as for college students, it's a skill they need to learn. They might not have learned it yet by third grade, and by college it may have been taught out of them. I learned it was disingenuous when I told my students I would give them responsibility and then pulled the rug out from under them by having a final exam at the end of the course. It contradicted what I was saying all along. This idea of consistency in our practice is critical; our philosophy of teaching must fit with our methods of assessment and our focus on learning and growth. That should be part of courses throughout what we do, and shouldn't change the last day of class when we surprise them with some sort of teacher-directed test to make sure they got just what we wanted. Students have to believe in what we're saying, and we need to provide models of integrity, and I think that's what we're saying.

T: This is an interesting point and one I'm beginning to wrestle with this year. If we really believe in models of integrity, then shouldn't we also be modeling, doing ourselves what we're asking students to do? This year will be the first time in four years of working with portfolios that I'm going to keep a portfolio of my own which I will share with my students. I'm going to be modeling the use of a portfolio as a way of reflecting about myself. As a teacher, I'm going to use the same criteria I expect of them.

R: I want my pre-service teachers to be reflective practitioners. I try to get them to start reflecting on their thinking on teaching and, hopefully, they'll continue this throughout their careers. Certainly that's the model of a professional in teaching—someone who reflects on and is conscious of their practice.

T: Howard Gardner (1991) talks about schools needing to become more like apprenticeships. I like the idea that as teachers, we have students apprenticed to us. We're not only conveying a body of knowledge, we're teaching a way of learning. Apprentices of old were required to show examples of their work on the way to achieving levels of mastery. Today, in much the same way, portfolios have the potential to demonstrate learning in powerful ways.

Conclusion

As teachers, we are tempted to go beyond a conversation about the merits of portfolios and to enter the realm of suggesting ways for implementing them. There are many reasonable, practical

guides to getting started with portfolios at the elementary, secondary, or college level. We have noted a few in our List of Resources. In practice, however, the power of portfolios lies as much in the act of creation as in the resulting product. This is as true for the teacher as it is for the student.

While imminently more messy than pre-digested guidelines, matching the portfolio process to the way you teach by engaging students in the process of developing standards, collecting and selecting from their authentic work, and making presentations to an audience is where the experience will flourish. It is through this collaborative process that students are empowered to make decisions, set personal goals, and develop self-evaluation. This experience of personal and social construction is the vehicle that brings meaning and value to learning. We encourage teachers to explore the possibilities of portfolios with their students and, together, to reach out to the heart of learning.

In addition to their benefits for students, portfolios are a way for teachers to develop professional community. Lave and Wegner (1991) discuss communities of practice and argue that we need to develop common languages in those communities. Portfolios can serve as a means for teachers to collect and reflect on their own work, lesson plans, and creative curriculum, as well as on work their students have done. Portfolios give us a picture of professionals who are growing and learning about their work. They also give guideposts to look back and see where we've been, what we've accomplished, and what we've learned.

Moreover, portfolios support the idea of collegiality, teaming, and integrated studies. We need to have more authentic links between disciplines. No teacher wants to make artificial links between disciplines. We need to have teachers talking to each other in schools about what they are trying to achieve in their educational settings. What are those common themes, skills, and abilities we want kids to be learning across the disciplines? Those shared objectives do exist; we want kids to be critical thinkers, problem solvers, able to articulate ideas using numbers and words. That runs across content areas. For portfolios at the end of the year, or for graduation, students can bring together all their work to show they have those skills of critical thinking, problem solving, and working with

others. This would start making those ties and breaking down the artificial barriers we so long created between subjects where the focus is almost entirely on content acquisition and too little on application and use.

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